JACOB'S STRUGGLE WITH THE ANGEL
Gn 32,23-33

Prayer

"Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil. [12] For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. [13] Therefore, put on the armor of God, that you may be able to resist on the evil day and, having done everything, to hold your ground. [14] So stand fast with your loins girded in truth, clothed with righteousness as a breastplate, [15] and your feet shod in readiness for the gospel of peace. [16] In all circumstances, hold faith as a shield, to quench all (the) flaming arrows of the evil one. [17] And take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. [18] With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones"

/Eph 6,11-18/

Introduction

Hard moments, trials and difficulties remain stored in the human mind for years and can determine the way we think and act throughout our entire life.

Jacob's struggle in the middle of the night is significant and can be a pattern for many of the human struggles that occur. From his attitudes we can learn how to face our own struggles.

Text

In the course of that night, however, Jacob arose, took his two wives, with the two maidservants and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. [24] After he had taken them across the stream and had brought over all his possessions, [25] Jacob was left there alone. Then some man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. [26] When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the hip socket was wrenched as they wrestled. [27] The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me." [28] "What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob." [29] Then the man said, "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed." [30] Jacob then asked him, "Do tell me your name, please." He answered, "Why should you want to know my name?" With that, he bade him farewell. [31] Jacob named the place Peniel, "Because I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared." [32] At sunrise, as he left Penuel, Jacob limped along because of his hip. [33] That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the sciatic muscle that is on the hip socket, inasmuch as Jacob's hip socket was struck at the sciatic muscle.

Structure and Setting

This text has to be viewed within its larger context. For a good understanding of this text, much information is presumed: the characters are Jacob, his wives and his children. The ancient argument with Esau and the anxiety from meeting him creates the tension in the story. The location of the night fight is at a site where he had a revelation when he was running away from Esau (28,11-22).

An overview of Jacob's life helps us see the repeated moments he encountered divinity when he was leaving and returning.

- birth with his twin-brother Esau (Jacob is younger but tries to pre-empt Esau);
- Jacob steals the birthright from his brother and his father's blessing;
- For fear of his brother, Jacob flees to Haran to his family and intends to find a wife for himself among his relatives;
- **Jacob's dream at Bethel on a sacred site;**
- Jacob arrives in Haran and is welcomed by his uncle Laban;

- Jacob marries Leah and Rachel and serves Laban for 20 years;
- Jacob's sons are born;
- Jacob fights with Laban for a rightful share of property;
- Jacob escapes from Laban to turn to Canaan;
- Jacob meets with his brother Esau, preceded by a **fight with the angel;**
- Jacob and his children (as a part of the story of Joseph);

The closest context to this is that of an impending meeting with Esau (Gn 32-33). The long text can be divided into 7 shorter scenes.

Scene 1: Jacob's embassy to Esau (32:4–7)
Scene 2: Jacob prepares to meet Esau (8–22)
Jacob's fears (8–9)
Jacob's prayer (10–13)
Jacob's gifts (14–22)
<u>Scene 3: Jacob and wives cross Yabbok (23–24)</u>
<u>Scene 4: Jacob wrestles with a "man" (25–33)</u>
Scene 5: Jacob and Esau reunited (33:1–15)
Jacob approaches (1–3)
Greetings exchanged (4–11)
Esau's invitation turned down (12–15)
Scene 6: Jacob and Esau part (16–17)
Scene 7: Conclusion and Preview: Jacob settles in Canaan (18–20)

Instead of discussing every scene, we will focus on scenes 3 and 4 that are very closely related: both happen in the same night on the same spot and the first one serves as a temporal and spatial introduction for the final one.

Besides this overall external structure, there are a series of cross-references connected with Jacob's story:

- In the night struggle with the angel, Jacob is anxious about obtaining a blessing from him. Later on, he proves to be self-confident and says to his brother: "Do accept the present (= my blessing) I have brought you" (33,11). The ancient controversy about paternal blessings is thus revived again. At the beginning of the story, "Isaac explained, "Your brother came here by a ruse and carried off your blessing" (27,35).
- Other expressions (crossing, face) characteristic in this episode occur frequently in the entire Jacob story.

<u>General structure</u>:
23-24 Background for the story
25–26 Description of the fight
27–31 Dialogue
Naming Israel (27–29)
Naming of Peniel (30–31)
32–33 Departure and Etiological comment (33)

Lectio

23. In the course of that night, however, Jacob arose, took his two wives, with the two maidservants and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok.

The time-setting provided in this verse has continuity with the previous one, where Jacob sent gifts to his brother Easu while he stayed in the camp for the night. The characters mentioned are known from the previous narrative as well.

The river Jabbok is one of the west-flowing tributaries of the Jordan, which joins the Jordan approximately 25 miles north of the Dead Sea. The name "Jabbok" means "divide" and the river became the dividing line between the Amonites and the tribes of Gad and Ruben.

We don't know what made Jacob change his plans and evacuate the camp, since crossing a river at nighttime would be a dangerous operation. Jacob's rash action might be revealing his distress, or the seriousness of the situation, as in other instances: "Now rouse yourself; set an ambush tonight in the fields, you and the men who are with you." (Judg 9,32 in a military operation); "Joseph rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed for Egypt" (Mt 2,14 protecting family). The fact that he took his wives and children to be a part of this night action shows his deep concern to protect and save his family. Or, he might have wanted to have his closest ones with him…

Crossing the river is an important step that cannot be reversed. It is the equivalent of destroying all of the bridges behind him, as when he was fleeing from Laban: "Thus he made his escape with all that he had. Once he was across the Euphrates, he headed for the highlands of Gilead" (31,21). At the same time, it is also the act of looking ahead; and the fight is prefigured in the name of the river: Jabbok translates into "wrestling" in v. 25 and to the name of Jacob as well.

24. After he had taken them across the stream and had brought over all his possessions

The idea of crossing is fundamental: the irreversible decision and its consequences will apply to Jacob's wives and children (he had taken them across the stream) and for his possessions (he had brought over all his possessions).

25. "Jacob was left there alone. Then some man wrestled with him until the break of dawn"

This verse is unspecific and doesn't explain how Jacob was left alone: does he return back, or does he go off on his own? It seems to imply that Jacob crossed the river by himself back to the original camp-site. The idea behind the whole night-action might be to inform us there was nobody in his party with him when he was attacked.

His wrestling sounds like the river Jabbok he just had crossed and like his own name. The form in which they fought is also unspecified: the verb used here means fight where dust is whirred. It might be a form of another verb, which means "to embrace": "When Laban heard the news about his sister's son Jacob, he hurried out to meet him. After embracing and kissing him" (29,13). There is nothing friendly in this struggle for life, as there was nothing friendly in the embrace of Laban and Jacob.

His rival is unspecified and the only thing we know is the duration of the fight "until the break of dawn". The fight had to be quite long and Jacob wasn't able to recognize the divine identity of his rival. The break of dawn is a way to express time, when God comes to judge and punish: "As dawn was breaking, the angels urged Lot on, saying, "On your way! Take with you your wife

and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city" (19,15). This time-frame is filled with more content in the following verses where we learn a few more details about this mysterious fight.

The adversary is described as "some man" and only later he will be indirectly identified as God (v. 31). There have been suggestions that the origin of this account is an attempt to identify its origin as a folk account of Jacob's encounter with a Canaanite river god.

The Bible describes similar accounts about dangerous encounters with the divine: (i.e. Moses:) "On the journey, at a place where they spent the night, the Lord came upon Moses and would have killed him. [25] But Zipporah took a piece of flint and cut off her son's foreskin and, touching his person, she said, "You are a spouse of blood to me." [26] Then God let Moses go. At that time she said, "A spouse of blood," in regard to the circumcision"; (Ex 4,24-26); Balaam (Nm 22,22-35); Gideon (Josh 5,13-16).

Rabbinic commentary: The adversary was Jacob's guardian angel in human form, or Satan. He stayed until the break of dawn, when the angels gather for morning praise of God in heaven.

Patristic commentary: The name "Jacob" is interpreted as ascetic or athlete – who exercises, wins over vices and gains virtues. The scene represents a spiritual battle, where God grants interior peace and enables one for contemplation.

26. "When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the hip socket was wrenched as they wrestled".

Jacob is extremely strong in the story: he removed stone from the well (29,10) and now fights with a mythological character.

The first part of the verse is unclear in Hebrew, since it contains no explicit subjects (only pronouns) and its results are unclear as to who could prevail over whom. The literal translation would be "When he saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck his hip at its socket, so that *Jacob's hip socket was wrenched* he wrestled with him". This particular manner of describing the night fight might be intentional with the purpose of uncovering only the absolute necessary information about the identity of the rival as well as about the course of the conflict.

One touch alone results in being so powerful as to give knowledge of the superhuman power of Jacob's opponent. A strong touch discloses the divine power: "He touched my mouth with it. "See," he said, "now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged."" (Is 6,7). Jacob doesn't seem to be bothered and continues to struggle. He has even more determination to fight and to force his opponent to speak and disclose his identity.

The striking can be interpreted as striking his hip, or as a euphemism for the genital organ.

Rabbinic commentary: This hit is interpreted symbolically as the persecution of the Jewish nation by the emperor Hadrian.

Patristic commentary: Jacob's hip stands for bad Christians. Jacob is blessed for those who live well and is limping for those who live badly.

In both instances we have a tendency to believe that the meaning of the action was fulfilled in the descendants, which tends to favor the interpretation about hitting Jacob's genitals.

27. "The man then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go until you bless me"".

Daybreak is recognized as a time when light and darkness are mixed and they symbolize Jacob, who partially carries light and partially carries darkness. It is also a symbol of the place (Transjordan), which was a partially holy and partially profane land.

Again, looking at the Hebrew text, we see the lack of specificity, since there is no subject in this verse: "He then said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But he said, "I will not let you go until you bless me"". From this verse (and from the text thus far) it is unclear who wants to leave first and who is asking a blessing from whom. It seems as if the weaker were asking to leave and the stronger doesn't let him leave, until he receives a blessing. But why ask for a blessing from one who is weaker?

Why is the angel asking to leave at all? Midrash (Jewish commentary) says the angel wanted to keep his appointment to sing in the heavenly choir. It might indicate his desire to continue to hide his identity and gives Jacob one more opportunity to recognize his superhuman character.

Patristic commentary: The fight doesn't continue after daybreak, because there is no fight for those who live in the light. Where there is Christ, the light of righteousness is in our minds, which enlightens our hearts. We will be served as noble souls and worthy of God's attention (Cyril from Alexandria).

"Morning" is the light of truth and wisdom, through which all things were created. We will be happy when this night is over – the iniquity of this world. There will be morning when the lord comes and we will see him the way the angels do. (Augustine).

Jacob represents the Jewish people and the angel is an image of Christ – the savior. Jacob was fighting with the angel, because that's how the Jewish people were supposed to fight - until death. When the angel touched and wounded Jacob so that he was limping, the limping leg signifies the Jews who did not believe in Christ. The part that remained whole indicates the Jews who accepted Christ. The victory of Jacob over the angel represents the persecution of Christ until his death. When Jacob was asking for a blessing, he symbolized all those who believed in Christ. Finally, daybreak represents the resurrection of Christ, since he rose before daylight. (Cesareus from Arles).

28. """What is your name?" the man asked. He answered, "Jacob."""

This verse doesn't give us an answer to the question or the previous ones. We still don't learn who was stronger and who was weaker. Asking for a name indicates the inferiority of the one who asks: "Moses said to God, "when I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?"" (3,13). It seems as if Jacob was the superior and victor.

The one who gives a blessing must know the identity of the one who is blessed. It seems strange when the angel asks Jacob's name. It doesn't serve as information for the angel but rather by saying his name, Jacob discloses his character. He must say his name "Jacob". In revealing his name ("Jacob" = cheater, liar, traitor) he admits having cheated his brother: "His brother came out next, gripping Esau's heel; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born" (25,26); "Esau exclaimed, "He has been well named Jacob! He has now cheated me twice!" (27,36). He cheated his brother and was cheated by his father-in-law. Cheating is not only a part of his name, but of his story too. His name, however, contains the notion of heroism as well: a constant struggle against fate and obstacles, where he never gives up.

29. "Then the man said, "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed."""

The impression of Jacob's superiority is canceled immediately: giving, or changing the name of someone is a sign of superiority. Adam gives names to all the animals in paradise: "the LORD God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be its name" (2,19). God even changes names (Abram to Abraham; Sarai to Sarah): "No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham" (17,5).

The new name given to Jacob is Israel, which is the name of the whole nation. In granting this name, Jacob's opponent reveals the true significance of the encounter. The etymological explanation offered here relates the name Israel to the verb "struggle, fight". From now on, in his name he will be bearing not only the memory of this one night-struggle, but all the struggles of his entire life: "you have contended with divine and human beings" - against his brother Esau, against his father-in-law Laban; for his beloved wife Rachel, struggle for survival in the land of Canaan and especially in Egypt, where he will find refuge with his family in times of famine. After all that: "he has prevailed". Jacob gives credit to his name (cheater) and his whole life (career of cheater and fighter against everybody). He proves successful.

His name, however, indicates one more thing: his name Israel is a theoforic name: it contains the name of God and its full meaning is "El (God) fights / God fights on his side". He is not alone in his struggles, because God is always with him. So the meaning of his name is "God fights, God struggles". His name serves as a constant clue about God and about Jacob's life-struggles at the same time. His life-adventures are never without God.

Change of name indicates change of identity: Jacob won't be the old cheater but a successful warrior. When his descendants use this name they are reminded of Jacob's victories. As their father has triumphed in his struggle with men (Esau, Laban) and with God, they can eventually hope to triumph in their struggles. This episode also looks toward the meeting with Esau and the success which Jacob will have there.

Patristic commentary: Jacob was fighting with a person who represented Christ. As the Jews won over Christ, so did Jacob. When they killed him, they showed superiority. Christ was stronger but he was overcome and because he lost, he won for us. In suffering he gave his blood. Jacob won over him, but he understood correctly that it was a sign. The one who loses gives his blessing, as the one who is killed, liberates. (Augustine).

30. "Jacob then asked him, "Do tell me your name, please." He answered, "Why should you want to know my name?" With that, he bade him farewell".

Now Jacob asks the name of his rival, implicitly identified with God (29). He recognizes his superiority and feels the need to know his name. He doesn't receive an answer to his petition which is a common motive: "Manoah said to him, "What is your name, that we may honor you when your words come true?" [18] The angel of the LORD answered him, "Why do you ask my name, which is mysterious?"" (Judg 13,17-18). Instead of name, he gives a blessing. (The correct translation of "With that, he bade him farewell" should be: "blessed him there"). Now, the rival is really superior, since he gives a blessing. Still, he remains mysterious and unknown, so that Jacob has to find an explanation for all of it by himself.

Patristic commentary: We are blessed through our body. Augustine ponders the incarnation and the Eucharist. Believers see that they are blessed when they receive the body of Christ.

Ephrem: The angel blessed Jacob in order to show that he wasn't upset by the fact that an earthly creature defeated him. Jacob wanted to be blessed in order to show that the fight was out of love.

31. "Jacob named the place Peniel, "Because I have seen God face to face," he said, "yet my life has been spared."'"

Now Jacob seems to be the main character, since he gives a name to the place of his fight. The place will forever bear a mark and be a testimony of his fight. It will be called Peniel (= God's face) (Judg 8,8-9.17; 1Kgs 12,25). Peniel was an important ford crossing over the river Jabbok. It was also the name of a fortress that was destroyed during the period of the judges (Jdg 8,8).

The biblical tradition strongly attests the belief that nobody was allowed to see God directly. Whoever sees God, dies: "my face you cannot see, for no man sees me and still lives" (Ex 33,20; Is 6,5). Only on special occasions of God's revelation were a few people allowed to see God face to face. Among the few exceptions is Moses, the preeminent servant of God: "no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Dt 34,10); "The LORD spoke with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire." (Dt 5,4). Whenever people have a closer experience with God (up to the point of seeing his face), their life is totally changed, like that of Moses. (His "seeing God face to face" is typically explained as a type of mystical experience, or posterior awareness of what happened).

Jacob's comment about the fact that his life had been spared might be surprising. The whole course of the fight suggests that Jacob was winning, not losing. Also, most likely he was aware of the unusual character of his opponent, but it doesn't seem likely that he was thinking about fighting against God, or seeing God. This comment of his is more likely a posterior reflection about what had happen. The consequence for him is obvious: since he has been able to survive meeting God, he will also survive the meeting with his brother Esau.

32. "At sunrise, as he left Penuel, Jacob limped along because of his hip"

The conclusion of the story repeats once again the time-limits set since the beginning: "until the break of dawn" (v. 25) and it reiterates the information about his hip from v. 26. A new era in Jacob's life starts. It seems as if Jacob were leaving as a victor but he is still wounded after that night and he will be bearing God's mark forever. He is not totally self-sufficient.

33. "That is why, to this day, the Israelites do not eat the sciatic muscle that is on the hip socket, inasmuch as Jacob's hip socket was struck at the sciatic muscle."

What we have here is an etiological explanation inserted into the story as its conclusion. Etiology is when the current state of things is explained and justified by an action or situation from the remote past. (For example, the deserted country around the Dead Sea is explained as divine punishment for the moral corruption of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra).

We don't have any later references or proof in the Bible or other sources that the Israelites wouldn't eat this part of the animals.

Like the rite of circumcision that was introduced after Abraham's name was changed, it became a constant mark on their bodies by which people were constantly reminded of the election. Here, the Israelites are constantly reminded of Jacob's meeting with God, the promise of final victory and the blessing obtained there.

Patristic commentary: the revelation to Jacob was meant to give him courage and show him that in God's eyes he is untouchable by his enemies. God has shown how much tenderness and affection he has for the patriarch. Keeping the promise not to eat the sciatic muscle is, like the other commandments, a simple reminder to meditate about God's actions. (John Chrysostom).

Meditatio

1. In his night-struggle Jacob only gradually recognizes the divine origin and superiority of his mysterious opponent. This is a summary of all his life-struggles against his closest relatives: he cheated his brother and now takes advantage of the weakness of his opponent. What is behind is his constant zeal to obtain a blessing at any cost.

Human life is full of struggles against very simple and human obstacles as well as in situations in which we can't clearly see the meaning, or a problem seems to overwhelm us. Taking advantage of others is certainly something that shouldn't be imitated, and this side of the biblical stories is not to be used as justification for what we do wrong. What we should learn from Jacob is the fact that it never left his mind or view of God as the origin of human success, possession and happiness. Being in a deep crisis and feeling seemingly abandoned or exploited by everyone, we are encouraged not to despair and seek refuge in God. **Ps 27,1** "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom do I fear? The LORD is my life's refuge; of whom am I afraid?"

2. Names are never given randomly and this is valid in the Bible even more. They carry a meaning and determine peoples' lives. Jacob has to pronounce his name – "Jacob" (traitor, cheater) and admit his non illustrious past, in which he has cheated his brother by stealing from him the first-born right and his father's blessing (25,26; 27,36). His actions with his father-in-law haven't been totally honest either. Only now his name is changed to "Israel" (God fights; God rules). Only after admitting his shadowy past, God will definitively be on his side.

Every time a person admits their past and confesses their weaknesses, is a turning point in their life. Not because we need to inform God about ourselves. He knows us better then we do! Realizing who we are and where we have been in the past primarily serves primarily us: admitting that as a part of one's life is the only way to change that. What is constantly refused and hidden can't be amended and healed. Honesty in front of God and ourselves is the first condition of starting life anew, with a new name and new identity. Is 62,2 "You shall be called by a new name pronounced by the mouth of the LORD"

3. Jacob, even though being externally by himself in his fight, is not alone at all. He fights for his family which he tries to protect with great care. He also bears the destiny of the whole nation after him in his new name. His experience wrestling with God will be seen ever after as having prefigured the national experience: the nation's trials will be seen as sent from heaven. At the same time there is a firm conviction that they can be resolved through heavenly deliverance (Ps 74; 79; 80; 83). This short story is a summary of Israel's national destiny. Every time God seemed to fight against them (in their trials and perplexities) he was ultimately holding their side, allowing them to be victorious.

Only allowing God to win, can people be successful. Struggling and searching for a better understanding is meaningful and significant: people want to know their meaning and purpose. So far, this is a justified struggle with God. But at a certain point we need to recognize our limits and allow God to have the last word, in order that he "fights for us", or "rules over us", as goes the meaning of "Israel". Every nation that subordinates God's norms to its own choices fails to recognize the importance and meaning of the trial, where God is superior. Going against him means, in the final account, going against ourselves.

Job 42:2-6 "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be hindered. [3] I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. [4] [5] I

had heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. [6] Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes."

5. Jacob bears God in his new name "Israel". It is a constant reminder of God's victory in his life and this will be the heritage for all his descendants – this name will be passed onto the whole nation. From now on, they cannot complain any more about God being absent from their lives. He is present in their very midst, even in their names.

We as Christians bear the name of Christ in our name; he is a part of our definition and identity. Without him we lack a substantial part of ourselves, we are not complete. Often people complain about the lack of public impression of their faith: the general public opinion doesn't support their way of life and Christians seem oppressed by everything. Under the pressure in our modern society they forget Christ and have a hard time finding their way to him. Instead of searching around, we just have to be more attentive towards what is proper to us, what we already have and what determines us. Even if we lack the general support of society, our faith is something proper to us: we bear Christ in our name – we are Christians. Let us discover him in our lives first and live up to him. "it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians" (Acts 11,26).

6. Jacob's experience is constantly repeated by the Church and all the believers who, too, face tests and struggles. In the prayer "Our Father" we pray: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil". With these words we express that God might allow us to be put into situations that are tests but, at the same time, he has the power to preserve us from evil and from failing. It is as if God were fighting against us and for us at the same time. Calvin expounds on this with the following words: "while he assails us with one hand, he defends us with the other; in as much as he supplies us with more strength to resist than he employs in opposing us, we may truly and properly say, that he fights *against* us with his *left* hand, and *for* us with his *right* hand. For while he lightly opposes us, he supplies invincible strength whereby we overcome."

Prayer

Almighty God! Many moments of our life are not illustrious, or easy. We would rather like to forget or avoid some of them. You are the origin of everything and you give us every moment of our life, whether nice and enjoyable, or toilsome and hard to face. Give us always your courage to face them with confidence in you! Give us wisdom to learn a lesson from everything! Give us grace to be changed, so that we bear your name and your presence in our lives and become more and more similar to you, who are our ultimate model.